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Intersectional inequalities and intimate relationships: dating, class and ‘race/ethnicity’ among divorced women in the ‘second phase’ of life

Abstract

Responding to increasing discomfort with the lack of diversity in studies of intimacy in later life, this paper explores the making of couple relationships among White British middle-class women and British Asian working-class women in their ‘second phase of life’. We consider what intimacy means for women at this juncture in mid-life and how they traverse the socio-sexual spaces of dating post-divorce. We examine how women’s navigation of dating reproduces wider structures of inequality in intimate life. Talk of compatibility is examined as a veil for the classed and racialized habitus, and deeply implicated in the reproduction of social structures. Racial-ethnic and class inequalities are co-constitutive of the gender and age inequalities stacked against older women’s efforts at repartnering. We therefore contend that repartnering is a matter of concern for intersectional feminism.

Keywords

Ageing, Class, Dating, Divorce, Gender, Heterosexuality, Intimacy, Intersectionality, ‘Race/ethnicity’

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Introduction

This paper draws from two separate ethnographic studies of middle aged women's post-divorce moves towards repartnering, one focussing on middle class White British women and one on working class British South Asian women, to offer comparative insights into the intersections between gender, age and heterosexualities. The paper explores what happens after the break-up of a marriage in mid-life, what intimacy means for women in the 'second phase' of their lives, and how they navigate possibilities for future couple relationships. Sociological celebrations of emerging new 'counter-normativities', whereby people are said to pursue intimate and sexual lives outside of couple relationships (Roseneil 2009), have been argued to be premature, as at the turn of the 21st century, most single people in Britain still aspired to sexually exclusive co-residence (Lampard 2016). If conjugal intimacy is something in which most people seem to want to participate, then it is also a matter of justice (Bedi 2015) and we should take inequalities in the making of couple relationships seriously. This paper demonstrates that the 'second phase' of life is one in which women experience prejudices in intimate life associated with their gender and age. Their intimate lives are also, we find, structured by inequalities of class and 'race/ethnicity', in ways that may be less obvious – at least, to some – but are no less tangible. We therefore argue that there is a need to approach intimate couple relationships through a lens of intersectional inequality, taking forward insights about the ways in which families and personal relationships are implicated in intersectionalities.

Giddens (1992) argued that personal relationships are being detraditionalized, with people no longer following set scripts associated with unquestioned marital roles but rather entering 'pure relationships', sustained only when it suits both parties. Giddens' work is emblematic of an influential theory of the individualization of the family (see Illouz 1997; Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Bauman 2003) but these assertions have been unpacked through growing numbers of context-situated qualitative

empirical studies providing insights into the everyday workings of intimate and personal relationships. Jamieson's (1998) meticulous canvas of empirical studies demonstrates the obduracy of inegalitarian gender roles in heterosexual couple relationships. She concludes that few people live in Giddens' world of voluntary relationships unfettered by pragmatic adjustment and realism and thus that 'the story of a shift to "disclosing intimacy" is too selective a story to be anything other than a very partial picture of an emerging future' (p.159, and see Carter 2012; Gunnarson 2013; and van Hooff 2013).

The relations between gender and intimacy have thus been theorised richly in relation to the maintenance and dissolution of couple relationships, but we seek here to address a different problematic: the *making* of couple relationships. We fill out our conceptual moorings in the following section, before turning to detail our two respective studies and introduce our ethnographic material.

The 'second phase' of life, heterosexual hierarchies and erotic justice

The women in our studies were in the 'second phase' of life. This term may be taken to refer simply to the second half of the life course. It may also convey more specific connotations associated with the historical moments through which the generation of women with whom we worked had lived. This generation, in their 50s at the time of our research in the early 2010s, were those who were born into the relatively stable nuclear families of the mid-twentieth century – 'the blip mistaken by many social commentators as "the normality from which we have departed"' (Langhamer 2007, p.178). They are also the generation whose youths passed through the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s and 70s, and who experienced new legal possibilities for divorce as a result of the 1969 Divorce Reform Act. Giddens (1992) is exemplary of much wider sociological commentary about the expansion of possibilities for intimate life in the last half century that has posited this generation as revolutionary.

However, alongside optimistic visions of *The World We Have Won* (Weeks 2007) come visions of 'the world *some* have won' (McDermott 2011) alerting us to the exclusion of class from much discussion and raising questions about exactly 'whose experiences are being used to generalize understandings of sexual and intimate life' (p.64). Developing the concept of 'heterosexual

hierarchies', Jackson (2011) points out how societal discourse on heterosexual women's newfound capacity to flout convention without attracting moral opprobrium bears significant middle class biases. We enter into a further layer of complexity if we try also to integrate 'race/ethnicity' into the analysis (our scare marks and the '/' sign here referring to 'race' and 'ethnicity' not as two separate systems of meaning but as 'racisms' two registers', Hall 2000, p.223, and to the dense interrelations between these two concepts). Smart and Shipman (2004) suggest that the sociology of individualization has offered us a 'vision in monochrome' failing to take on board the experience of 'racial/ethnic' minority families in Britain. There is an unstated white normativity at work in characterising this generation in terms of liberal feminist values and lifestyles; British South Asian women in this generation have been imagined at the other end of the spectrum in terms of individualism, family and gender norms. Journalists, community spokespersons and sociologists have often spoken of British Asian families as 'flying the flag for traditional family life' (Young 2000), with low rates of separation and divorce indicative of them 'lagging behind' in the overall trend towards individualization (Berthoud 2000). More recent quantitative analysis suggests that rates of marital breakdown in British Asian families have doubled since the mid-1990s, a pace of change equivalent to that observed in the White British majority (Qureshi 2016). While suggesting that representations of British Asians families as 'old-fashioned' are unsustainable, these statistics do not imply that the processes fissuring marriage in minority families will necessarily be the same as those in White British families, nor that intimate lives post-divorce will be shaped by the same desires.

Drawing together Sarah's study with middle-aged White British women and Kaveri's, with middle-aged British South Asian women, this paper interrogates sociological theory concerning the transformations of intimate life against empirical material on our interlocutors' reflections on repartnering and dating. We seek to intervene in debates in two regards. First, we examine the difficulties of reentering couple relationships for women who are contemplating repartnering in the 'second phase' of life. We engage here with a literature on older women's experiences of heterosexual dating, which indicates that 'movement through the later stages of life involves a decline in social valuation; however, ageism intersects with sexism to generate a steeper decline for women than men'

(McWilliams and Barrett 2014, p.412). Like other studies in this vein, we consider what intimacy means for women at this juncture in their lives, and how they traverse the socio-sexual spaces of dating post-divorce in mid-life. Departing from earlier work, however, we also respond to increasing discomfort with the lack of diversity in studies of intimacy in later life. In spite of consideration of the interactions of age and gender, ‘difference in relation to race, ethnicity and the ageing body remains under-explored’ (Rajan-Rankin 2018, p.33), as have the interlinkages with class (p.34).

We therefore adopt an explicitly intersectional approach, to shine a light on how multiple aspects of identity may interlock and combine in individuals in ways that give or deny power (Crenshaw 1990).. Women who experience prejudice in their efforts at repartnering as a result of their gender and age may also discriminate against others on the grounds of social class, ‘race/ethnicity’ or migration status. Our second intervention in this paper is therefore to examine how women’s navigation of repartnering and dating may also reproduce wider structures of inequality in intimate life. We add here to a literature on cultural matching in couple relationships which has taken inspiration from Bourdieu’s (1977) ‘habitus’ to give insight to the ways in which people’s intuitive sense of social likeness or compatibility is produced by a socially-structured subjectivity that is conveyed by micro-practices of bodily comportment, accent and taste. Studies suggest that the workings of the habitus are perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the domain of love. Illouz (1997) argues that the habitus allows people to experience romantic love as spontaneous and free emotion whilst simultaneously assigning them partners who are compatible with their social positions and trajectories. Johnson and Lawler (2005) coin the phrase ‘habitus compatibility’ to denote how people feel ‘comfortable’ and ‘at home with’ with romantic partners who share a similar social space to them and have similar classed dispositions, a common ‘feel for the game’ (p.5). Rather than steeped in romantic freedom, people’s choices in their intimate partnerships emerge as highly socially ordered.

We take forward this insight about how talk of compatibility may be a veil for the classed habitus. But we also consider how other differences, such as ‘race/ethnicity’, may be written into embodied dispositions in ways that generate an intuitive sense of compatibility in intimate relationships.

Bonilla-Silva (2013) has sought to broaden Bourdieu's concept of habitus by exploring its racialized character, to show how 'racial' differences emerge in routine interaction through a 'racial habitus' that is naturalised but socially-structured, comprising tastes, perceptions and emotions. This 'racial habitus' is explicitly recognized and negotiated in 'inter-racial' relationships (see Steinbugler 2012; Buggs 2017). Similarly, studies of romantic relationships in South Asian contexts find that young people's sense of comfort with, or attraction to others who embody their own caste culture and religious values operates on the same lines (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008; Twamley 2014).

To be clear, our assumption is that repartnering across social categories diffuses inequality and so is a good thing, a normative view that aligns with Sonu Bedi's (2015) recent work on 'erotic justice'. Thinking through the consistent empirical finding that people prioritize individuals as romantic partners in ways that reinforce racial hierarchies (see e.g. Clarke 2011), Bedi seeks to theorize reciprocal romantic relationships as a matter of social justice. He develops this position in normative political terms by considering intimate life as a capability central to human dignity and a social primary good. We return to this conceptualisation of 'erotic justice' in the concluding discussion.

Research settings and methods

Sarah's study was conducted between 2011-13, and Kaveri's, between 2012-14. Sarah sought to explore the lived experiences of ageing, femininity and heterosexuality amongst middle-aged women who were deciding to, or were dating again after divorce or separation. She used salsa classes in central London as a space of entry to the field, learning the dance herself, and as a 'way in' to meet, informally discuss and interview participants. Twenty participants were interviewed more formally, purposively chosen to include age and experience of life stage. The participants lived in London or commuted to the city. Almost all of the participants, formal interviewees and people Sarah worked with more informally were in their 50s at the time of the fieldwork, and born in the 1950s. The participants were heterosexual and single, dating, or in relatively new relationships. Although this was not a deliberate decision about the study design on Sarah's part, all of the interviewees in Sarah's study identified as White, and the salsa classes generated a largely middle class circle of women.

Sarah's project thus increasingly involved her in excavating the Whiteness of her research subjects, even when they did not comment on this category explicitly – thus de-centring Whiteness as a 'pervasive normative presence' (Bonnett 1996, p.97) and arresting it as a 'racial/ethnic' category.

The social setting of the salsa classes contrasts with Kaveri's study, which explored marriage breakdown among British Asian families, particularly among Pakistani Muslims. The study was based in East London and Peterborough, in historically working class localities that are extremely diverse in 'racial/ethnic' terms as well as transnationally connected, with large numbers of recent migrants living alongside long-settled populations. This wider study involved participant observation over a period of several years, enabling Kaveri to chart the complex developments in people's marriage careers, from privatized attempts at family and religious mediation to interactions with religious law and civil litigation, to separation, divorce, solo life, remarriage and children. More formal interviews were carried out with 74 participants, of whom 51 were women and 23 were men. The interviews drawn on in this paper are with the oldest cohort of women in the study, matching the age demographic of Sarah's study, and we focus furthermore on the subset of divorced/separated women who were heterosexual, single, and contemplating new relationships. Almost all the women in this cohort described their first marriages as coming about with substantial selection and involvement from their parents. In contrast with Sarah's participants, the majority of older women who were contemplating repartnering were not dating 'a second time round', but for the first time, in the 'second phase' of life. Whilst Sarah encountered the salience of 'race/ethnicity' in the course of analysing her material, Kaveri was conscious of these categories in her work from the beginning, wary of the 'treacherous bind' (Gunaratnam 2003) where re-deploying 'racial' categories in scholarship reinscribes essentialising categories and yet, these categories also generate meaningful lived experience for us, as researchers, and for the people with whom we work. In contrast with Sarah's research participants, the women in Kaveri's study analysed their situations explicitly in 'racial/ethnic' terms.

In Sarah's and Kaveri's studies, the process of data analysis largely followed a thematic approach in which we developed descriptive codes through line-by-line coding of interview transcripts, to allow

for analysis across the cases, as well as treated each transcript as a case study in itself, by constructing case memos. We went through an intensive reading of another's work, searching for common threads and divergences. To understand these commonalities and departures we applied an intersectional approach, as in Twamley and Sidharth's (2019) recent cross-study comparative analysis, examining how our interlocutors positioned themselves and others across the two studies (p.1655).

In what follows, we work through empirical material from both studies, contrasting how the women negotiated the possibility of re-partnering in their social spaces and family and personal lives. We then consider their moves on the dating scene, and how their reflections on their dating decisions created classed and 'racialized' or 'ethnicized' identities, which reproduce wider social structures.

Respectable, safe spaces

In this section we consider what intimacy meant for our interlocutors at this juncture in their lives. Perhaps surprisingly, given that they had recently been through divorces or separations, the women in Sarah's study expressed approval and nostalgia about their parents' more long-standing marriages. In a way that was characteristic of this group of women, Laura, who was in her fifties and had been single for three years, described her parents' relationship in glowing terms: 'my mum and dad have always had a strong relationship ... they never parted, you know they've stayed in the same house all their lives'. Laura had embraced the 'second stage' of her life and described herself as more confident and independent than in her youth and whilst married. Yet she reflected that the tighter communities of the past, both imagined as present in her parents' generation and also in 'Victorian times', would have helped her meet new partners as a single woman in her fifties;

Our families in the past would have helped or introduced, you go back to the Victorian days, would have introduced your partner to you, or a catalogue of young men for you to choose ... Of course in the Victorian days that was different because we didn't have the independence that we have today.

Rather than straightforwardly advocating for Victorian values, reading these quotes in the context of the women's concerns about repartnering suggests that this nostalgia for enduring marriage served to stake out their interest in committed long-term relationships rather than sexual experimentation. They situated their desires for new relationships in this context of yearning for long-lasting, stable romance.

At the same time, participants actively rejected their mothers model of 'traditional' ageing femininities, as exemplary of an 'inside life'. Jemima, who described herself as having focussed on bringing up her children for the last twenty years and now felt it was time for herself, in her fifties, to get out of the house and socialise, characterised her mother as having a 'very much smaller' life than her own. She described how, when she was in her teens in the 1970s, her mother had been 'hungry for me to get up on Sunday mornings to share [stories about Saturday night discos], she'd relive every interaction!'. Jemima went on to compare the way she herself related to her daughters' lives now, producing herself as much more independent in relation to her children;

I haven't fallen into that trap, I'm still living for myself. So whilst my children are doing it [dating/socialising] for the first time, I'm not reliving it but I'm experiencing myself, a new found freedom...(Jemima)

As we see in this extract, the women linked dating and socialising outside the home to a sense of independence and freedom. They expressed difficulties, however, in finding spaces where they could socialise outside the home, where they could potentially meet new partners and also feel comfortable. As Sarah Milton (2017; 2018) has earlier argued, there are valuable insights from queer theory, about how sexuality and space co-produce each other, in that as one moves through space one is sexualised, or feels sexualised norms in particular ways, and in turn bodies sexualise the space (see e.g. Hubbard 2000; Ahmed 2006). Although this literature is focussed on queer experiences of the heteronormativity of public space, the fundamental insight concerning the sexualisation of space resonates richly with Sarah's study, as women spoke of feeling 'out of place' in social spaces in which sexual identities were regulated in particular ways. They attributed this to their age. Newly

single in midlife, they spoke of uncertainties, stories of loneliness or of feeling unusual amongst friends and peers. They felt ‘out of place’ in their ordinary social spaces, spaces they characterised as ‘family and couple-orientated’, whereas the spaces that they thought of as available for meeting men – such as pubs and clubs – were associated with a youth-oriented display and embodiment of sexuality.

In negotiating this disjunct between their desire to meet new potential partners, their couple-focussed social networks and the norms of public space channelling a younger clientele towards pubs, clubs and restaurants, the salsa classes were important. Participants often referred to the classes as their ‘own’, separate from family and normal life and importantly, welcoming to all ages. As Sarah learnt through her own participation in the classes, the rules of this particular space – the minutiae of negotiating the physical distance one should maintain with a particular partner, whether and how to place one’s hands on the shoulder and back of one’s partner, and the clothing that should be worn – were all negotiated in ways that tiptoed around the maintenance of respectability. In addition through their talk, the women sought to distance themselves from appearing to actively seek out sexual partners, in ways that implied this would not be age-appropriate or respectable. The ‘safe’ salsa class space was often described differently to the salsa club space, in which people were more overtly on the look out for new partners and this felt threatening, ‘a meat market’ and ‘bit intimidating’;

You might hopefully attract a different kind of person that salsa dances [in the class] because you aren’t going there for that. Whereas in the nightclub, a lot of people go there for that... that’s a whole other thing that goes on out there. (Jane)

Dating experiences were often described in ways that toned down their active stance in seeking out new partners. Those who had experienced online dating, for example, described having much encouragement, often being ‘forced’ by friends to join up, with friends filling out the forms for them. Performing passivity in these ways worked to disguise themselves as desiring subjects, even when discussing spaces explicitly designed to meet romantic and sexual partners. In contrast to much sociological discussion of the revolutionary sexual mores of women in this generation, and to studies

of the assertive sexualities of older single women in western contexts (e.g. Fileborn et al. 2015a; 2015b) the women in Sarah's study were explicit in explaining how they were actively trying to socialise beyond the family in a way that was different to their mothers but still respectable.

Similar to the women in Sarah's study, in Kaveri's study single women expressed a sense of feeling unusual in social spaces that were not only family-oriented but seemed powerfully determined by a woman's containment within marriage, by their identification as the wife-of-somebody:

Sometimes with Asian people, they know I'm divorced but they'll still ask me 'Where is your husband?' [acts out how people would feign innocence]. I went to a function (wedding) on my own and all my sisters were there with their husbands and there was I... I stopped going to functions for a while, but now I go. Life carries on. (Suman)

The Asian women, the Pakistani women, basically, would stop and look.

On the street?

Yes! Very much so... Because it would be that I'm a danger to them somehow, I could contaminate them because I'm separated. There was a huge thing about, 'Oh, she's separated! We don't want to hang out too much with a separated woman', 'Don't talk to her in case your wife gets ideas' [the objection from the husbands] or 'What if my husband sees it' [the objection from the wives]. (Rani)

As this last extract suggests, rather than merely 'out of place' as single women in networks of family and friends, it could indeed feel as if a single woman of their age were 'matter out of place', in the sense offered by Mary Douglas (2003), of things that don't fit in with the dominant categories of thought being dangerous, with potential to contaminate. Many of Kaveri's participants described being actively sidelined by their families and friends as a result of being separated or divorced.

Whilst they, like the women in Sarah's study, complained of having no role models to follow as single women in midlife, the descriptions of their mothers' marriages and how this related to the intimate life they desired, or thought possible, differed too. Few of the participants in Kaveri's study were nostalgic about their parents' marriages in the way as Sarah's interlocutors. They described their mothers as deeply committed to their own marriages, even when these had been difficult. They thus reported disapproval from their mothers when they themselves tried to divorce. However, they were not however ostracized permanently, and in the long-run their natal families came to the fore in picking up the pieces, extending refuge, emotional and financial support. The ambivalences were expressed by Nusrat, a 58 year old migrant woman who had been in an extended separation for ten years and who divorced over the course of Kaveri's research. In the following quote, she describes her mother's tacit acceptance of her extended separation but absolute disapproval of a formal divorce:

Ammi said to me '*Sharom karo, abhi tum bhoorhi ho rahi ho, kya zaroorat hai tumhen yeh cheez lene ki*' (shame on you, you are getting old, why do you want this divorce) and continued saying 'What difference will it make if you get this divorce? It means your intentions are bad, *kisi dusre mard ke piche paro gi?*' (will you launch yourself after another man?). She continued to repeat herself in this unpleasant and humiliating tone. (Nusrat)

Nusrat was open with Kaveri in describing her desire for conjugal intimacy and even sexual partnership, but in her current situation, she felt it improbable that she could find another partner. She was a single mother with three teenage children, living on Income Support and with additional financial help from her brothers. She and her children were living in one of her brothers' houses, and on a street where two other brothers, and her parents, also lived. She said in frank terms that she could only contemplate another relationship when she was financially independent from her family.

I really and truly, from the last six months, Kaveri, I went to the GP and I had discussed with her, I said to her that 'I am having these desires, I want there to be somebody to hug me, and have sex with me and sleep with me and share with me, I don't know as if I am feeling lonely

or what, I don't know, it is my natural desire. I don't know how to manage my feelings, what to do. As like some people, or my mother, is feeling about me, or my brothers are feeling about me that I am getting very old. Now this thing, they might not be able to even imagine this about me... (Nusrat)

Comparing Sarah's participants' explanations of their tentative search for 'safe spaces' with Kaveri's reveals how the knit of familism and gender norms was tighter for women in the context of working class British South Asian communities. Whereas Sarah's participants sought a space of their own, separate and independent from the family, Kaveri's participants were still very much within the family space; a situation produced by their material dependence on their natal families as much as through cultural mores focussed on retaining a good reputation and bargaining with the moral voices of kin and community, and thus as much produced by their socioeconomic positioning as by cultural norms. The sense of respectability articulated here centred on a woman's reputation in the family. Discourses of honour based on a woman's sexual containment and continence had a hold, even if women were privately critical of them. We now turn to discuss how the research participants talked about their desire, and for what kind of men, and what this said about themselves.

Calculating compatibility

When reflecting on how their age mattered, most of Sarah's research participants commented that since they felt more confident and sure of themselves than when they were younger, they hoped that the maturity afforded by their age would help them find the right partner. They hoped that the men of their age would appreciate the same generational cultural references, to music, or about taken-for-granted habits of dating – such as the man chivalrously opening the door, pulling out a chair at the table, or paying the bill at a restaurant. The women expressed romantic fantasies about the relationships that they desired, but these fantasies frequently met with disappointment as the men they encountered who were of their generation, came across to them as needy or dependent. This didn't suit how they saw themselves in this 'second stage' of life, as independent and looking for adventure.

They were discerning, using the word ‘compatibility’ in ways that, as Johnson and Lawler (2005) suggest, euphemized social class. Maureen, who had been married for 18 years and started dating at 47, was 50 at the time of the interview. She described ‘a very strict list of things that the guy has to have’. This included two ‘non-negotiables’ – being optimistic and a non-smoker – and two which she said she would ‘take a variation’ upon: being financially independent, and therefore having no need to rely on her at any point, and that their ‘outgoings did not exceed their income’. Despite saying she would allow flexibility on the financial aspects of her requirements, she talked to Sarah in animated detail about these latter points. She said she was able to tell, ‘by looking at a person’s behaviour patterns... what kinds of clothes they’re wearing and, and you know, what their job is’, and draw from these indicators whether or not they were able to ‘afford their lifestyle’.

Internet dating sites cater for these requirements and desires; participants talked of websites like findamillionaire.com and sugardaddie.com as offering guilty pleasures. Their descriptions of men with money – ‘financially secure’, ‘fascinating’ – contrasted dramatically with those of men without. They very explicitly linked a man’s financial status explicitly to his attractiveness. Penny had divorced five years previously at 49 and had recently started making time for dating alongside running her own company. She described having met ‘a lovely chap’, who she wasn’t attracted to because he was too ‘mundane’ – boring, but in a way that followed from his rather ordinary job;

I was meeting rather mundane people. Very mundane, I mean there was a lovely guy I went out with who, who, who worked with the RAC ... Um, He was um, he was divorced, he lived near me ... I mean he was a lovely chap. (Penny)

She described how she was put off by his lifestyle;

... he was so, I mean, his life was a holiday a year of two weeks in Thailand or, you know, somewhere exotic for two weeks. His life was totally regimented. He went for the Heart Marathon, you know he went to the pub on Friday night if he made it. He wanted to take me

out to dinner perhaps to celebrate the week, and you know, Saturday night we'd go out for dinner and he wanted me to stay over and have sex and you know the whole – that was his whole life. But it was just not me. Just not me at all. Um, and that was the problem. So therefore in some way I like this Sugardaddy.com [chuckles]. (Penny)

In a similar way to how Maureen talked about being flexible about finance, but wasn't in practice, Sandra described herself as 'really down to earth' because she wasn't 'totally after somebody that's got loads of money ... I want somebody to have a little bit of something about them but they don't have to be wealthy'. However, in the very next sentence, in the same way that Maureen did, she described a nice man that she hadn't any time for because of his level of income;

I looked at his profile and he was a postman, and he was very fit, and I like sporty people because I do running myself and um I thought well if he's a postman, then postmen are going out of fashion and I deleted him. (Sandra)

She described feeling guilty after this, and felt 'snobbish' but justified herself with the following words; 'I think I can be because I've waited this long, so at the end of the day you know what you're looking for. So yeah I have deleted quite a few of them'. Whilst Penny used the word 'mundane' to describe a man with less money, and the associated lifestyle, Sandra used the word 'grotty';

... you have to really sieve them out, because there are some, not being snobby or anything, they are some real grotty guys. So you do have to sieve them out but it's like anything, you've got to have patience. It takes a long time. (Sandra)

The imagined lifestyle a man could offer was very important, and seemed to signify and validate their worth as a woman. If they could attract this kind of man, it meant they were doing their femininity successfully. As Johnson and Lawler (2005) have suggested, Bourdieu's insight about how taste not only classifies, but classifies the classifier is highly pertinent to these women's self-narratives. These

derisive descriptions – ‘grotty’, ‘mundane’ – reveal little about the men they were dated, and more about the narratives they were creating about themselves, as valuable, middle-class women, drawing boundaries around and producing themselves as ‘classy’ (Johnson and Lawler 2005).

Sarah did not ask the women explicitly about the ‘racial’ or ‘ethnic’ backgrounds of the men they considered desirable or with whom they could imagine a long-term relationship, and the women did not volunteer perspectives on this in their interviews. As argued by whiteness studies, the working of White women’s own ‘race’ may be less apparent, even invisible to them, their privilege taken for granted (Frankenberg 1993). The workings of ‘race/ethnicity’ may however be highly visible to those who are othered in racialized social fields such as in the contexts in which we worked. This contrast is illuminated by the participants in Kaveri’s study, who volunteered their opinions about the ‘race/ethnicity’ of prospective partners very explicitly, and ahead of commenting on their socioeconomic positioning. Here the imminent problem was the huge difficulty of finding a suitable man (which meant a man with similar ‘racial/ethnic’ and religious background) who would take seriously a divorcee in their age group. Naheed, for example, complained that the ‘Asian men’ in her age group would prefer to go for a younger woman with less baggage – meaning children:

I went to this Muslim marriage event, there were so many of our people there, Pakistani, divorced. And what I noticed, that our Pakistani people that’s their mentality, they’re so narrow-minded; they think, that if a woman’s divorced, if she’s got kids, even though they’re divorced themselves, they’re all going for single girls! So, 45-50 year old Pakistani men, they’re all going for 25-30 year old single young women. They was not interested if you’re divorced, they’re not interested if you’ve got kids. And that’s so sad. And with those people, it’d be better if I marry a White guy or a Black guy. (Naheed)

The discrimination she experienced in her interactions with divorced Pakistani men left her, she explained, with the option of dating White or Black British men. But she expressed apprehensions about this, as she felt there would be different expectations of sexual morality and respectability. She

described how she had explored a relationship with a ‘half-caste’ man – half White British, half Pakistani – whom she had met on another dating website. Ultimately she felt there was an unbridgeable gulf of relationship expectations between them. Considerations related to her extended family were very important here. She said she personally felt able to entertain the idea of dating a man who identified as Christian – reasoning that it was at least a monotheistic Abrahamic religion, like Islam – but she could not imagine squaring this with her children or with the rest of her family:

He said to me ‘oh, until I can’t live with you, how can I get married with you?’ I said to him ‘but I can’t do things like that’. He said to me ‘with you, everything is about your children, your family, where do I stand in all this’. I said to him ‘you’re not understanding my problem! Because your culture is different you don’t understand that I’m not allowed to do the same thing that you do. If I do this, I could lose my family, I could lose my kids. (Naheed)

Sexual mores were critical here. Sarah’s participants sought to negotiate dating in such a way that left them sexually respectable, but Kaveri’s participants were even more explicit about the need for a shared sexual morality. They hoped that confining their search to dating organizations that were tailored to British Muslims, such as singlemuslim.com, or ‘Muslim marriage’ events, ‘Muslim speed-dating’ events, might help with this – or even South Asian matrimonial websites such as Shaadi.com. Shanila, a 48 year old British-born divorcee who had been dating for several years, had been registered on SingleMuslim.com by a friend. She said she had a lot of male interest on there, but nobody who was of interest. Although Shanila had dated a few men since the end of her marriage, she expressed a concern with the relationship ‘going somewhere’ – like other women in Kaveri’s study – and for that somewhere to be marriage, or else she would not entertain it.

I never keep men as friends so it was like that’s it, cut, if there’s no marriage cut the person, it’s black or white, it’s never anything in the middle. (Shanila)

We discussed above the sense of calculatedness expressed by the women in Sarah's study, the clarity about what they were looking for in a partner that was rooted in class concerns. Financial considerations were relevant too to the women in Kaveri's study, but without the 'snobbishness' that the women in Sarah's study acknowledged in themselves. Shanila, for example, had met a 47 year old man who she got on with well with and even went to meet with one of her daughters. He worked in IT, earned more than £100,000 a year and lived in Sweden. He was a good match, 'really into' her, but 'typical' her, she didn't take it any further because he didn't have the looks she prized.

My sister, when she was younger she used to say to me, 'I don't look at good looking, I look at 1) how big is his wallet?' ... But I'm attracted to ones that are soft inside, very simple, loving and giving, who can give to charity, do you know what I mean? (Shanila)

Naheed wasn't 'snobbish' in her preferences either, but she had two bottom lines; he should be financially secure, and not a drain on her, and he should also have secure immigration status.

A woman wants to feel like if she gets married then a man's gonna support her, give her a house. But I've got a house, I can support myself. So what can I get from a man? Ok, if he's going to be faithful then that's one thing, but I've never seen any man that doesn't want nothing from me. Either he wants accommodation or he wants a visa. (Naheed)

We see again here the similarities with the women in Sarah's study, in how they perceived men of their generation – or of their marital status – as more dependent and needy than themselves, but here, in a social context of continued immigration and transnational connection (see Qureshi 2016) her understanding of dependent and needy encompassed immigration concerns as well as employment and occupational status. In this regard, Kaveri's research participants were, like Sarah's, deploying aspects of their intersectional identity that gave them incongruent positions of power, discriminated against by virtue of their gender and age but capable of exercising discrimination on the grounds of social class, 'race/ethnicity' and, in a transnational context, immigration and citizenship.

Concluding discussion

Whether the youth-oriented heteronormativity that Sarah's research participants registered when they went out in pubs, clubs or restaurants, or the stigma of being a woman unattached to a man in social functions oriented towards extended families, as reflected in Kaveri's study, we have described similar difficult experiences of dissonance or marginalisation for middle-aged women exploring repartnering. The spaces they socialise in differ, but both groups felt very acutely the normativity of the heterosexual couple or marriage and family orientation for women of their generation. We have described the hesitancy that both sets of women felt in sociosexual spaces as single women, without role models to follow and unsure of the dating 'rules' for women of their generation. We have also described the different relationships the women had with their mothers' model of respectable ageing femininity. Sarah's participants pushed the model of their mothers away quite forcefully, aligning themselves with contemporary models of femininity that embody independence, but still approved of their mothers' respectability and romanticized the long-standing relationships and close-knit communities of the past. Kaveri's participants were more ambivalent, critical of some aspects of their mother's model of married womanhood but continuing to live by their moral standards even as divorcees. This was partly because of their reliance on their families in living as single women, which gave them a continued hold over their physical movements, life choices and steps towards repartnering – the product of socioeconomic positioning as much as 'race/ethnicity'.

There are ways in which gender and age bond the intimate lives of the women in both studies, in their concerns with respectability, and with negotiating safe spaces for repartnering. But these are refracted through different social contexts and histories, and with different consequences. When it comes to their articulations of desire, and for particular kinds of partners, we begin to perceive the ways in which intimate life may be intersected by social positioning. Whilst talking in terms of romantic discourse, Sarah's participants were articulate about their calculatedness, their clarity about seeking out a partner who would match their aspired class status. We see the affective aspects of class relations, in the contempt they expressed, distancing them from various kinds of undesirable others,

which works to maintain boundaries. They volunteered narratives built around their class identities and subjectivities, but were silent about their choosing of White men, the workings of ‘race/ethnicity’ assumed and taken-for-granted. By contrast, Kaveri’s participants volunteered narratives about the ‘race/ethnicity’ and religion of a prospective partner as a fundamental factors undergirding their sense of whether a new relationship would work, a sense informed by a ‘racial habitus’ (Bonilla-Silva 2013) attuned to a particular sexual morality embedded in diasporic ethnic and religious identities. Financial considerations were also explicit, although without the cathartic ‘snobbishness’ that Sarah’s women acknowledged in themselves. If Sarah’s interlocutors used the incongruent power positions of their intersectional identities to discriminate on class grounds, Kaveri’s did too, on explicitly ‘racial/ethnic’ lines and repudiating others on grounds of immigration and citizenship.

Our material confirms that intimacy, specifically considering conjugal intimacy and romantic relationships, produces and reproduces social inequalities. Through focusing on desires and emotions surrounding these, we can see the difficulties that these women face, as older women negotiating singledom and the prospect of repartnering in the ‘second phase’ of life, but also how their moves on the dating scene reproduce inequalities through their own structured and structuring dispositions. Large-scale studies show that conjugal intimacy is the goal to which most single people in Britain aspire (Lampard 2016), lending support to Bedi’s (2015) interpretation of reciprocal romantic relationships as a social primary good, or as a capability basic to human dignity. Bedi views ‘sexual racism’ as inherently more problematic than discrimination on the grounds of social class or education, for example, arguing that unlike ‘sexual discrimination’ on the grounds of other characteristics ‘racial discrimination invokes a category with social and historical importance’ (p.998). Our material leads us to disagree with Bedi’s view on the innocence of other forms of discrimination in intimate life, but we agree that desire is steeped in unconscious and implicit biases – in spite of extensive cultural discourse on love as ineffable and beyond rational judgement’s reach – and that it is no less unjust for that; fuller integration of intimate life is a requirement of justice.

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